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Minnesota
SCHOOL BOARD
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AMERICAN *Am* MAJORITY

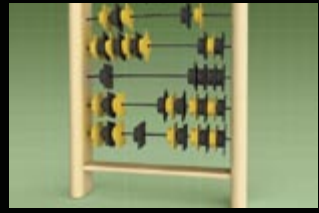


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Introduction

It has been nearly two hundred years since Alexis de Tocqueville wrote his classic, *Democracy in America*, but his words and insights still hold true today. Early in that work, Tocqueville praises local government at the town and county levels. He knew that local self-government is the foundation of a free republican government, and that the vibrancy of local governments in turn strengthened the nation as a whole. But for local government to work effectively, the citizens must be knowledgeable and engaged. The question we face today is whether more people will become engaged in their local government so that the American republic will continue to thrive 220 years after its formation.

One of the most basic forms of local government is the school board. There are over 15,000 school districts in America, with roughly 85,000 school board members. Those members in turn oversee the K-12 education of about 50 million students, with K-12 educational expenditures exceeding \$550 billion a year. However, despite the money being spent, American test scores continue to decline, and as a nation we continue to lose ground to other countries around the world: our spending on education has increased by nearly 130% over the last 30 years, but as we increase our spending, the scores continue to drop. It's obvious to many thinking people that something is not working.

What we need for our school boards are more people dedicated to seeing the system work. Though it is a bit cliché, our children are our future. If we want America to continue to be a great nation, then we need to focus on how we might best empower them to succeed in the future. In America, we have allowed our education system to become a monopoly, and yet in the real world, we



know that competition produces better results. We must bring competition to American education to enact change: reforming the education system must be a priority for all people, regardless of party affiliation.

This manual is not meant to be the end-all for people considering running for school board, or wanting to know more about the system and potential reform. Its goal is to be a gateway to other information, to introduce people to what a school board is, how it works, and potential reform ideas that are needed to bring about positive change. I hope that this manual will be an encouragement to people to become involved and engage in a very important role on their local school boards.

We as a country do have a serious problem when it comes to our K-12 education system, and reforming it will be a challenge. But as Tocqueville wrote: "The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults."

Sincerely,

Ned Ryun
American Majority

So you want to run for school board...

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the United States is currently spending over \$550 billion on public elementary and secondary education per academic year. This means that taxpayers are paying an average of over \$9,000 per pupil, per year. National test scores should reflect these expenditures, but they do not—for the past three decades, scores have basically stagnated.

We are also losing ground as a nation. U.S. students face formidable competition from their international counterparts, particularly in math and the sciences. In the latest round of tests from the Program for International Student Assessment, sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, U.S. students were ranked below average in both mathematics and science literacy in scale with their international peers. As the United States faces increasing economic competition from other countries, we need a skilled, educated populace more than ever.

What has been our response to poor performance? When a business produces a substandard product or offers a substandard service, we take our business elsewhere—the business is compelled to produce a better product in order to keep its customers. Not so the public education system: it has been failing benchmarks for decades, and our response, almost without exception, has been an increase in funding. “In the contentious world of education politics, the need to spend more on public schools stands out

as a rare point of agreement,” report scholars William G. Howell and Martin R. West. “What’s more, a solid majority (59 percent) of Americans express confidence that spending more on the public schools in their district will increase student learning.”

Candidates for public office often include “more funding for schools” in their platforms—and the public responds enthusiastically. Advocates of increased spending perpetually argue that inadequate funding is the problem, and increased spending is the solution. However, studies have shown that public sentiment is not always based on accurate information. A 2007 survey by *Education Next* and Harvard’s Program on Education Policy and Governance quizzed Americans on how much their respective districts were spending per-pupil on education. The average estimate from respondents was less than half the actual amount. Respondents also *underestimated* the average salary of teachers in their districts by nearly \$14,500. If we are spending so much money on education, why can’t we tell? Where are the results? One of the most frequently



debated questions regarding education finance is the one devoted to “How much money is sufficient in order to provide a suitable education?”

But even though education spending has risen substantially over the past several decades, it has made little observable difference—in some ways, none at all—in measures of student achievement. Scholar Jay P. Greene, in his book *Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe About Our Schools—and Why It Isn't So*, writes that per-pupil expenditures, adjusted for inflation, doubled in the 30-year period between the early 1970s and 2001. “If more money were going to produce better results then we would expect to see very significant improvement during this period,” says Greene. “This has not happened. For twelfth-grade students, who represent the end product of the education system, NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] scores are basically flat over the past thirty years.” **Money, it turns out, cannot buy achievement.** We must do two things: seek alternative solutions to the difficulties we face, and use the money we *are* spending more effectively. In other words, it is not more money that is required, but rather more money in the right places, i.e. funding that is directly focused on classroom curriculum and related activities.

In 2007, the State of Kansas and the Marion Ewing Kauffman Foundation commissioned Standard and Poor's School Evaluation Services to conduct an Educational Efficiency Study of the state's school districts. The overarching objective was to help Kansas better understand which districts are utilizing their resources most efficiently and how less efficient districts may benchmark themselves against these districts to identify improvement opportunities. Although it is sometimes presumed that the highest-performing districts are also the highest-spending, the Standard and Poor's study concluded that there is no significant correlation between per-pupil spending and proficiency rates on reading and math tests among the state's school districts.

We need to get our focus back where it should be: on our children. Simply protecting vested interests will not produce a quality education for America's students. Our goal must be to improve the system with real solutions and strategic reforms. Students and their families are the foundation not only of our school system but also of our nation. Our future largely depends on the choices we make today in how we educate the coming generation. So what reforms need to be made? What reforms are already underway, and what can you, as a member of a school board, do to help?

What is a school board and what does it do?

The average citizen probably does not think much about the local school board, particularly if he or she does not have children in the school system. Notoriously low voter turnout rates at school-board election time (many times a single digit turnout) indicate that most people are probably unaware who their local school board members are or what their responsibilities entail.

Scholar Richard Briffault has pointed out that nowhere does the U.S. Constitution mention a national education system: the establishment and operation of public education was left in the hands of the states. Each state is divided into districts, and each district is served by a school board that oversees local public schools. There are almost 15,000 public school districts in the United States, and most of them are governed by a school board.

The local school board is the body that provides the essential link between the public—the citizens who both entrust their children to the educational system and pay the taxes to support that system—and the system itself, including the principles, teachers, and administrators who run it. The Wisconsin State School Boards Association puts it succinctly: “There is hardly a single agency of government which is more a function of local control than the school board.” It is a privilege to serve on the local school board, but it is also a serious responsibility: some school districts like Fairfax County, Virginia have as many as 160,000

students in their districts, and some have even more. The school board sets academic and policy goals for the district and works with the superintendent to accomplish them. It also manages the education budget for the districts, oversees all school personnel—including teachers, administrators, facilities managers, and subcontractors—and in general serves as an advocate for all students in the district. A local school board has several responsibilities, some requiring more attention than others. Some of these duties include:

Managing and approving the district budget (includes setting levies). Many members of the community are overwhelmed when they learn that their local board of education establishes approximately 55-60% of their personal property tax bill;

- Hiring and working with the superintendent
- Approving teacher salaries
- Monitoring student achievement
- Tracking district enrollment and attendance
- Setting the academic calendar



- Approving facility maintenance and construction
- Oversight of school personnel (administrative, custodial, and others)
- Oversight of student services
- Reviewing and approving curriculum
- Managing student transportation
- Ensuring that local schools are in accordance with federal and state academic standards
- Negotiating subcontractor agreements; and
- Providing parents and members of the community with a voice into the education of their children, a vitally important, but often overlooked, aspect of a school board member's responsibility.

While a handful of school boards are appointed, the vast majority of them are popularly elected. In recent years, some struggling urban boards have been taken over by the state, and members subsequently appointed by the governor and mayor. In fact, school board members are the only elected members of the local educational system. As such, they have a tremendous amount of responsibility—and a tremendous amount of authority in charting the course of the public school system and in determining the quality of education the students receive. According to advocates Chester Finn

and Lisa Graham Keegan, school boards were originally intended to “keep politics out of education.... Local school boards exist largely to oversee the spending of funds drawn from local property taxes. In this sense, they are supposed to be the community’s accountability mechanism, ensuring that school officials use locally generated resources wisely and responsibly.”

Structure. Local school boards usually consist of five to nine members. Terms of office tend to run two to four years long. In small school districts, members often serve at-large. Typically large districts will have one board member that is at-large as well. Urban school districts are usually divided into subsection, each with its own representative on the school board (some urban districts also have a mixture of representative and at-large members). Boards generally appoint two of their members to serve as board president and vice president. The board is also aided by a clerk and a treasurer, who are not members of the board itself. In addition to the superintendent, the clerk and treasurer directly work for the board of education.

The school board has the power to form committees of three types: standing, special, and advisory. Typically, the board’s most important standing committee will be the



budget or finance committee, which review all budget policies, annual reports, and proposed amendments and reallocations. Other standing committees might include a policy review committee, which, as the name implies, discusses proposed amendments to the policies of the district; a curriculum committee; a legislative committee that drafts key legislative positions to present to the locally elected house representatives and state senators for consideration in the drafting and approval of state laws; an insurance committee (for school property, for example); and a committee for monitoring student achievement. Depending on its area of responsibility, a committee may meet as often as monthly or as seldom as once or twice a year. Depending on state statutes, most committees are limited to two, and in some case three, board members that may participate in the committee. These committees then bring back recommendations to the entire board of education for adoption consideration. It should be noted that binding decisions may not be made in committees, but may only be made upon the majority vote by the board of education.

School boards hold regular meetings, usually monthly or bimonthly. All meetings are open to the public except for when the board is in executive session (a members-only gathering when discussing board-confidential

business such as personnel matters or the acquisition of land or other property for school-related business). The board sets aside some time at each meeting for public comment, which may include participation by students, parents, or other citizens. Anyone wishing to comment in a board meeting usually needs to notify the clerk of the board ahead of time and submit his or her comments in writing. The president of the board presides over the public comment period to ensure order.

The school board clerk takes minutes of each meeting and makes them available to the public, placing copies at the public library, for instance, or uploading them online. In recent years, many school boards have made an effort to publicize their work through the Internet or through televised meetings and public comments through the local public access channel. It is increasingly common for a school board to have its own website that gives updates on board activities, and providing links to meeting minutes and agendas, the board policy manual, a meetings schedule, and other relevant documents.

School board members can exert some influence in an individual capacity—such as interacting with principals in a student case, or serving as an advocate for parents or special needs students,



or recommending a change in policy. However, all members should bear in mind that their only real authority comes from working with the board as a group via obtaining a majority vote from board members on a specific issue.

Superintendent. The school board's chief administrator is the superintendent, who oversees all the schools in the district. The school board's interaction with the superintendent is one of the most crucial aspects of the office. The superintendent's job is sometimes likened to that of a CEO—he or she manages all aspects of school district business. The superintendent is responsible for implementing all directives handed down by the school board and for accomplishing the board's long- and short-term goals for the district.

The superintendent has direct oversight of the school principals within the district. He or she also oversees food service directors, facility and operation managers, administrative personnel, and other staff. The superintendent regularly reports to the board, making recommendations and supplying the board with necessary information on the operation of the district. The superintendent oversees enrollment, curriculum development, and other matters directly relating to teachers

and students. In many districts, the superintendent appears at board meetings, gives frequent updates on the district budget, reports on enrollment figures, and makes an annual presentation to the board on the district's overall status.

The board, however, has final say all matters relating to the superintendent's authority, and it must vote approval before any initiatives take effect. The superintendent is hired by the board and serves at its pleasure. The hiring and oversight of the superintendent, including yearly performance reviews and the establishment of superintendent compensation, is one area where the school board can exert tremendous influence.

Budget. Administering the local education budget is one of the school board's most significant responsibilities. The size of the budget depends on the size of the district, the number of local schools, and local enrollment. A district's education budget covers everything from teacher salaries and benefits to building maintenance to extracurricular activities for students. Some urban budgets top in the billions—the Fairfax County, Virginia, school board, in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, manages an annual budget of \$2.3 billion. A district's education budget is usually funded by a mix of state funding, local



property taxes, and federal dollars and grants from various institutions. At the beginning of each fiscal year, the board determines how much money it will need to meet district goals and operational needs for the coming year; it then determines a levy that will meet that amount in tax dollars. The board then sends the total funding that is required to the local county treasurer who in turn levies a cost on all commercial dwellings and residential households within the district. Interestingly, the public does not get to vote on the taxation, or funding level, set by the board in most instances, but rather has the option to come before the board to voice opposition or support for the proposed budget. In some instances, the public does, by state statute, have the right to vote on some aspects of increasing local taxation on the community. The public does, however, retain the right to vote to approve or reject the board's recommendations for levies or bonds.

Board member requirements. If you are contemplating running for school board, check your state's

requirements for candidacy. According to a 2007 survey from the National School Board Association, most states require that you live in the district in which you are running, and that you live there for a specified period of time (usually six months to a year) leading up to your election. Many districts do not require any education beyond a high school diploma or a GED. Most states require and will provide orientation for new members; depending on the state, you might receive training in state-specific education laws, school finance, school management, and ethics. Many states often require school board members to attend annual workshops throughout their tenure in order to continue their professional development.

New school board members face a steep learning curve. Some current and former members report taking up to two years to understand the fundamentals of school board responsibilities, and then taking another two years to feel conversant in public education policy. One of the purposes of this manual is to accelerate that curve.

Serving on a School Board in the North Star State

If you are thinking of running for a position on your local school board, you will need to get to know your district: how many schools are in the district? What are the names of the schools? How many students are in each district? Who is the superintendent? What is the total yearly operating budget? Who are the current board members? You will also need to attend board meetings to see how the meetings are conducted, and find out some of the specific issues that your school district may be dealing with. It is not unusual for a school board member to spend 15-30 hours per week on board member responsibilities, including attending many functions throughout the community.

Minnesota's education budget for 2008-2009 includes \$13.7 billion from the state's General Fund, and is a 7.7% increase from FY 2006-07 spending; when the impact of education shifts, buy-backs are excluded. There are \$714 million in new dollars for education, and nearly 40 percent of the state general fund would be spent on education. Every district receives a general formula increase of two percent in each of the next two years, for a total of \$294 million. (www.education.state.mn.us)

States opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1992 and is still in operation today. Minnesota currently has a total of 143 charter schools, with over 28,000 students enrolled. These schools are sponsored by school district, non-profit organization, foundation or institute of higher learning, and the sponsorship is reviewed for renewal every three years. Information on requirements for charter schools can be found at <http://www.mncharterschools.org>.

In 1991, Minnesota was the first state to pass charter school legislation. The first charter school in the United



What does it take to run for school board in Minnesota?

Minimum age: 21

Voter registration required: Yes

Level of education required: None specified.

Residency requirements: The individual must have been a resident within the district for a minimum of 30 days prior to the election or special appointment.

Other Requirements: A candidate cannot be otherwise employed by the board at the time of candidacy.

Election day: The first Tuesday in November.

How to file for candidacy: Candidates for school district offices must file an Affidavit of Candidacy with the school district clerk (Minnesota Statute 205A.06).

Filing deadline for candidacy: Filing dates for school district, and other local offices vary. Contact the local school district clerk for additional filing information and requirements.

Primary election required: Varies, depending on the number of candidates.

Campaign finance regulations: Minnesota campaign finance law requires candidates and committees to file, financial reports:

- within 14 days after receiving contributions or making disbursements of more than \$750 in a calendar year
- by January 31 of each year following the year when the initial

report was filed. In addition, in a year when the candidate's name appears on the ballot, a report must be filed:

- ten days before the primary or special primary;
- ten days before the general election or special election; and
- thirty days after a general or special election.

A final report may be filed at any time after all debts have been settled and all assets in excess of \$100 in the aggregate are disposed of. School board candidates must file these reports with the school district clerk.

Size of school boards: The state mandates 6 or 7 members, however, districts with special legislation may have more or less.

How many school districts in Minnesota? 340

Voting plan: In most Minnesota school districts, school board members are elected by the district at large. There are a small number of districts that elect school board members by precinct.

Term length: 4 years

Term limits: None.

Salary: Varies by district.

Training Required: Within 6 months of being elected, school board members are required to attend budget and finance seminars taught by the Minnesota School Board Association.

Potential Reform

The U.S. public education system is one of the few sectors today that is almost untouched by competition. Because public schools are not subject to market forces, they have little real incentive to produce excellent students. For example, most teachers have moral incentive and a personal desire to see their students excel, but in a system of seniority-based compensation, successful teachers are not rewarded and poor teachers are not encouraged to improve. A system without incentives is good for bureaucrats, but not for children. How can we introduce healthy competition into our school system in a way that will help our students excel and prepare them to succeed in society? And what role does the local school board play in turning back this tide?

In recent years, several reforms have been discussed and introduced into the education sector, each enjoying a different level of popularity. Because education policy is largely determined by state and local governments, be sure to research the relative strength of reforms in your state or district. Some states are much more open to reform than others. Listed below are some of the major movements occurring across the country today and what you can do to encourage them in your area.

Merit-based teacher pay. Let's face it: teachers deserve to be duly compensated for their work. We entrust our children to them five days a week, and we count on them to help mold the minds of the next generation. However, the entrenched system of seniority-based pay—held in place by collective bargaining agreements between school boards and teachers unions—often prevents

districts from compensating teachers fairly.

First, a seniority-based system makes it difficult for school leaders to reward truly excellent teachers. A teacher who produces average or poor results but who has been in the system for several years will automatically make more money than a young teacher with few years' experience, even if he or she produces outstanding results in students. If a district were to insist on giving good teachers a raise, it would be required, by most union contracts, to give raises to everyone, regardless of performance. Frederick M. Hess sums it up this way: "While, on the whole, teachers may not be underpaid, those who excel, those working in tough circumstances, and those with critical skills are clearly shortchanged. The flip side is that mediocre teachers are overpaid, sometimes substantially."

Second, a seniority-based system



automatically gives preference to senior teachers when it comes to teaching assignments. Because many districts do not offer extra pay for difficult jobs, such as teaching in a low-income or inner city school, many experienced teachers naturally choose to serve in safer environments or in schools with good reputations. This becomes a problem when only junior instructors are left to fill the most challenging assignments. Teachers with the least experience are essentially sifted down to the students most in need of a highly qualified instructor. Districts could help remedy this problem if they were allowed to offer “hardship pay”- extra compensation for particularly difficult jobs. Without this incentive, a district risks shortchanges students as well and teachers.

Third, talented young people have little incentive to enter a seniority-based profession. While entry-level teachers, particularly those with only a bachelor’s degree, make salaries typical for other young professionals, they must wait for decades to make up the wages that their peers attain to within a few years. “Doctors and lawyers reap the full rewards of competence in their profession within 10 years of entrance,” writes Jacob Vigdor of Duke University. “Teachers must wait three times that long, even though evidence suggests that they become fully competent in their profession just

as quickly.” Common sense dictates that the most driven and ambitious college graduates will choose a profession that amply rewards hard work, long hours, and extra effort.

Fourthly, a seniority-based system cannot adequately fill teacher vacancies. Statistically, U.S. schools suffer a dearth of teachers in mathematics, the sciences. But most union contracts make it difficult for schools to raise salary offers for these hard-to-fill subject areas. Frederick M. Hess and Coby Loup, in their survey of the nation’s 50 largest school districts, report that the labor agreements in over 60 percent of those districts forbid extra compensation for teachers in shortage subjects. Some vacancies have become so difficult to fill that some states are beginning to hire teachers from overseas because of the dearth in the American market, the Associated Press recently reported.

The problems associated with seniority-based pay have finally prompted a few states to experiment with merit-pay methods. As of 2008, seven states have instituted pay-for-performance programs: Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Texas. Most programs focus on rewarding teachers for student achievement, but others also provide incentives for teachers to assume more responsibilities and develop professionally. Some initiatives

reward all the teachers in a school that meets certain benchmarks. Texas's programs, the Governor's Educator Excellence Award Program and the Texas Educator Excellence Grant, are designed to reward teachers who produce excellent results in schools that have high proportions of low-income students. And while most programs are geared toward teachers, others also provide rewards for principals and other school workers who influence student performance.

A good example of a pay-for-performance initiative is Minnesota's Quality Compensation Program, or "Q Comp." Passed in 2005, Q Comp not only provides incentives for teachers to improve student performance, but it also encourages professional development by rewarding teachers for taking on various leadership roles within the school. Schools in 40 districts across the state of Minnesota have opted into the program so far. Governor Tim Pawlenty recently proposed an expansion of the Q Comp program that would provide incentives for "mid-career professionals," particularly those working in math and sciences, to consider entering the teaching profession.

Merit pay is steadily gaining support. Even Democratic politicians, who have traditionally opposed alternative pay methods, have begun to speak supportively of pay-for-performance

programs. Some unions have even begun to take steps toward reform. The American Federation of Teachers recently earmarked one million dollars to fund "teacher-generated" actions to improve student achievement. One of these actions includes a pay-for-performance initiative. People are beginning to realize that incentives really do produce results, and, in the end, make for happier teachers *and* students.

Work toward balanced collective bargaining agreements. A collective bargaining agreement is the contract held between a school district and the local teachers union, specifying the terms by which teachers will work (or refuse to work) for the public school system. A typical agreement stipulates salaries and salary schedules, leave time, grounds for termination, disciplinary action, hours worked, and rules regarding transfers. In most districts, the collective agreement is the result of a professional council that consists of administrators, union representatives and the district superintendent.

While it is important for teachers and other school personnel to enjoy the same privileges and protections as any other worker, teachers union regulations have been stretched to the point where they not only risk shortchanging students, but also the teachers themselves. Frederick M. Hess and Coby Loup, in a



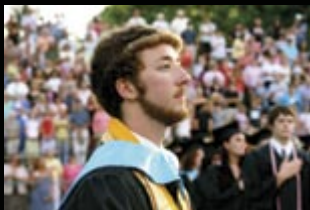
comprehensive survey of collective bargaining agreements in some of the nation's largest school districts, explain how the traditional union mentality is inappropriate for the educational system: "[L]abor agreements in public education are geared toward operating schools on the industrial model that prevailed in mid-twentieth-century America, where assembly line workers and cadres of low-level managers were valued less for their specialized knowledge or technical skills than for their longevity and willingness to serve faithfully as cogs in a top-down and highly bureaucratized enterprise." Such a model is ill suited to a profession that in which no two workers are alike. Teaching is not an assembly-line discipline—a teacher's students, subject, and responsibilities vary widely from another's; teachers may face challenges at varying levels of difficulty throughout their own careers that are different from each other.

Stringent labor contracts can potentially trouble a school system in several ways. First, it hampers principals and other school leaders precisely when they need to make important decisions. "[E]ven in non-collective bargaining states, school boards adopt policies that tie [school leaders'] hands in dysfunctional ways," writes Frederick M. Hess and Coby Loup. "This concern has reached a fever pitch in the No Child Left Behind era, as school principals complain being held accountable

for raising student achievement without being given authority to get the job done." Principals are charged with making sure that their schools *consistently* meet high academic standards, but they are prevented from taking the actions necessary to achieve this goal. If the school is desperate to fill an empty science-teacher slot, the principal is prohibited from raising the salary offer to attract gifted candidates. In many states, a principal cannot dismiss (or, in some cases, even discipline) a teacher who routinely fails in his or her responsibilities. In fact, it can be such a painful and laborious process—full of expense and litigation—to dismiss a single instructor that many administrators have found it more expedient to simply transfer a poor teacher to another school. This "solution," sometimes referred to as the "dance of the lemons," is really no solution at all—it just hands the problem to someone else.

In many states, because of union agreements, the board may only give pay raises across the board. Non-differential pay is typical of union contracts in several industries. One school board member in Wisconsin reports that his district raises teacher salaries by about one percent a year; the raise must be given to *all* teachers, and therefore the district usually cannot afford to give more. Frederick M. Hess and Martin R. West report that this limitation presents





serious obstacles to districts that are desperate to fill vacancies in typically understaffed departments, such as math and science: “[C]ollectively bargained salary schedules leave administrators unable to take these imbalances in supply and demand into account when making salary offers.” (see *A Better Bargain: Overhauling Teacher Collective Bargaining for the 21st Century*).

When it comes to negotiating with teachers unions, recognize your authority as a school board member; know what you are able to do and not do according to the laws of your district or state. Many collective bargaining agreements are ambiguous or altogether silent on issues such as whether or not a school can start a teacher at a higher salary if he or she has experience teaching at a private school, or whether a junior teacher with excellent performance may be preferred over a more senior teacher in personnel decisions. However, “while leaders in some industries would interpret these ambiguities as green lights,” write Hess and Loup, “in the bureaucratic halls of public education...regulatory obscurity usually equals inaction.” Board members often fail to exert their authority because they are intimidated by the unions (which have enormous resources and tend to be the most active participants in board elections), they are afraid of stirring up

controversy in the community; or they are not adequately informed about their own authority, or they do not have the support they need from the community to attempt reform. Gather support where you can, insist on clear contractual language, and, perhaps most importantly, back up your superintendent and local principals as they try to make decisions beneficial to students.

School boards should also encourage public dialogue on the issue, when appropriate. Many citizens, including parents, have little knowledge of collective bargaining terms and how they affect the students and teachers. Paul E. Peterson, director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard, writes that one of the only times the public is aware of union negotiations are during teachers’ strikes. “And strikes occur less now than ever before,” he writes. “Strikes have not decreased in number because the unions are now docile, but because, apart from excessive salary demands, they have grown accustomed to getting nearly everything they want at the bargaining table. And school boards are accustomed to giving it to them.” While true change may be a long time in coming, school boards should start taking an active, rather than passive, approach when it comes to collective bargaining.



Support School Choice. School choice is about letting parents decide which school is best for their child's needs. Recent studies by the Friedman Foundation, conducted in Idaho, Tennessee, Illinois and Nevada show a strong desire by parents for school choice: on average in those four states, 80% of the parents wanted to send their children to either charter schools, private schools, or home school them before sending them to a public school. In Idaho, only 12% of parents chose the public education system as their first education choice for their children. There are various forms of school choice: some of the more prominent types are discussed below.

Charter Schools. One of the most significant players in the arena of school choice today is the charter school. The charter school movement arose as parents and teachers became increasingly concerned about the quality of traditional public schools and began to seek out a way to make improvements. In 1991, Minnesota became the first state to create a law allowing for charter schools. Since that time, all but 10 states have passed similar legislation. (The states currently without charter school legislation are Alabama, Kentucky, Maine, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia.) Today, 1.2 million students are enrolled in over 4,000

charter schools across the country, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Put simply, charter schools are public schools that are operated by independent parties. As such, they are largely free of the rules and regulations that weigh down traditional public schools. Charter schools are public in the sense that they offer free tuition, have an open admissions policy, and are funded at least partially by taxpayer funds. Charter schools students must take government-mandated tests and meet the standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act.

Charter schools differ from district-run schools in management and operation. A charter school, as the name implies, holds its authority by a charter. The charter or "performance contract," as it is sometimes called, is an agreement between the school and the local charter school authorizer. In the charter, the school founders outline school governance, budget, personnel policies, curriculum, academic goals, and accountability plan. A typical charter is good for about three to five years, after which time the school must seek reauthorization. This timeline provides a strong incentive for charter schools to not only achieve but also demonstrate, through careful collection of data, academic success.

A charter school may be founded or sponsored by a group of parents or interested citizens, by a nonprofit, or even by a business. The founding group must complete and submit a rigorous application to the local charter-granting authority, which, depending on the district, may be the local school board, the state board of education, a university or college, a nonprofit, or an independent board established for the purpose of chartering. The authorizing entity is responsible for reviewing the charter school proposal and, if the charter is granted, for holding the school accountable to the terms of the charter. If a charter school fails to meet the established benchmarks, the authorizer may revoke the charter and close the school. This system is in marked contrast to a traditional public school, which usually receives more funding when it fails to meet benchmarks.

Although charter schools are eligible to receive state and federal funds, the amount of funding is determined by enrollment, and the schools usually receive less per-pupil than public schools do. In addition, in several states charter schools are responsible for finding and maintaining their own facilities. Consequently, many charter schools raise additional funds from individuals and interested organizations.

Charter schools have several potential advantages over the traditional public school structure:

- **Mission-oriented.** Charter schools are often inspired by a particular mission or need. Many schools have been founded to serve low-income and minority students who were being underserved by burdened public schools.
- **Responsive to community needs.** Because charter schools are often founded by a group of parents or interested citizens, they are sometimes better equipped to meet the needs of the community. For instance, a particular geographic area might have the incentive to train students in a specific vocation or discipline. The Memphis Academy of Health Sciences (MAHS), which was founded in 2003 and was one of the first charter schools in Tennessee, instructs students with a special focus in the health sciences. This specialized instruction has potential to bring economic benefits to the Memphis area, which has become a hub for health science research, and it prepares students for successful careers.
- **Flexible in instructional method.** Charter schools have





more flexibility than traditional public schools when it comes to instructional methods. Some of the first charter schools were founded for the purpose of experimenting with alternative curriculums and teaching programs. A charter school is accountable to students, parents, and the local authorizing body to produce the desired results. This provides an incentive for excellence and success.

- **Provides incentives to teachers.**

Charter schools are often better equipped than traditional public schools to attract talented and aspiring teachers because of the more flexible pay systems and leadership opportunities they offer. Because charter schools are free of many of the regulations that tend to limit teacher incentives and opportunities, teachers may have the incentive and flexibility to work hard and take ownership of their assignments.

- **Built-in incentives for excellence.** Charter schools have an incentive to compete for students because, as scholar Matthew Ladner points out, they do not raise taxes. “All public funds provided [to charter schools] come on a per-student basis, meaning that charter

schools must gain the confidence of parents in order to receive funding,” writes Ladner, of the Goldwater Institute.

Public schools, on the other hand, receive funding—lots of it—no matter what they do. If a public school produces high-achieving students, it receives funding. If it produces low-achieving students, it receives funding. In fact, struggling or failing public schools are often rewarded with increased funds. However, research shows that the presence of a charter school has a tendency to actually improve the scores of public schools in the same or a nearby district because it inserts the missing element of competition.

- **Strong accountability structure.**

Charter schools face the challenge of meeting the same academic requirements as traditional public schools, but with fewer resources. Charter schools are accountable to produce the level of student achievement goals set in their charters or they face possible closure.

The majority of charter schools are “start-ups”—schools built from the ground up by an enterprising group or organization. But traditional public schools can also be converted *into* charter schools, as has happened



in many urban districts. Charter laws vary from state to state, but in some areas, if a public school has consistently failed achievement benchmarks and is under duress, teachers, parents, and students can petition for the school to be converted into a charter.

New Orleans provides startling examples of both kinds of charter schools. The parish of New Orleans has embarked upon a fascinating charter school experiment due to the unusual circumstances brought about Hurricane Katrina.

More than 40 charter schools have been established or converted from public schools since Katrina, and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools reported that over half of all public school students in New Orleans were enrolled in charter schools for the 2006–2007 academic year. The administrators and principals of these schools have literally competed for students by taking out advertisements, promoting themselves on radio, putting up signs around town, and even going door-to-door to sign on students. *Education Week's* “Leading for Learning” report tells how the co-principals of Miller-McCoy Academy for Mathematics and Business, an all-boys charter school in New Orleans, advertised their new school on a billboard,

displaying their cell phone numbers so people could call for more information.

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation encourages balanced attention to achievement and compliance—that authorizing bodies assert rigorous oversight of charters in regard not only to academic achievement but also over compliance to proper school regulations and financial standards. While part of the point of charter schools is that they have flexibility to operate in ways other than public schools, it is important to their overall success, achievement, and reputation that they demonstrate proper compliance to regulations. When the local school board is the authorizer, as is the case in some states, the board must make a special effort in this regard, despite often being short-staffed and inadequately equipped to gather data.

The primary argument against school choice is that it drains valuable resources from the public school system and from the neediest students. Charter schools receive public funding and draw students away from neighborhood schools. Isn't this unfair? Why should we take badly needed resources away from the local public school and pour it into the local charter school? Another argument against school

choice is that it traps low-income and minority students in a poorly funded public system while enabling privileged families—who can afford private tuition—to send their children to “better” schools. Ideally, school choice means enabling students to attend the school that is best for their particular needs. If a student is struggling or is being disruptive in a public school, he can move to a school where he can get more individualized attention (see Greene, 46-47). If a student is thriving in public school, he can stay there. Overall, school choice strengthens the education system.

School choice means a lot more than helping wealthy families pull their kids out of a public school and sending them to an expensive private institution. Wealthy parents already have this ability because they have the money. In some ways, school choice is most beneficial for low-income and minority families. Research and actual experience has shown that school choice empowers the very students that would seem to suffer the ill effects. The very students who get “trapped” in a poor school are often those whose parents cannot afford to relocate to a better district. “Comfortable middle-class families already exercise school choice when they choose where to live,” writes education scholar Jay P. Greene in his book *Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe About Our Schools and Why It Isn't So*. “They have the financial means to decide what neighborhood to live in based partly on the quality of the local schools.... But low-income families cannot exercise this form of school choice, so their schools

can simply take them for granted.” From a funding perspective, most school districts are funded as a result of the number of students that actually attend the respective district. Therefore, if a student elects to go to a charter school, then the school is not missing out on any funding because it has not incurred the responsibility for educating the child.

Charter schools improve options for students, parents, and teachers; they bring diversity to communities, and they strengthen the academic environment in a community. School boards can support charter schools and demand excellence from them. Encourage more funding for successful charter schools; encourage grants for promising start-ups. Support rigorous review of charter applications, but cut red tape. Resist and remove caps, which limit the growth of charter schools within a state. Support parents and teachers who want to convert a struggling public school to a charter.

Vouchers. The voucher is likely the most controversial policy in the school choice debate. Voucher or scholarship programs essentially return tax money to parents so that they can choose to send their child to a private school. Vouchers are usually made available to low-income and minority families, who otherwise would be unable to send their children to a better school. Teachers, administrators, and policymakers argue that vouchers draw badly needed funds away from public schools. Others object that parents are allowed to use vouchers to send their children to religious private schools, and that this violates the separation between Church and

State (the Supreme Court has ruled in favor of vouchers on this issue). But vouchers can go a long way toward enabling some of the neediest students to attend the school best suited to their needs.

Vouchers can be especially helpful to parents with special-needs or learning-disabled students, who often have a difficult time finding satisfactory educational programs or environments for their children. (Indeed, these types of scholarships usually encounter less opposition than regular voucher programs.) The McKay Scholarship voucher program in Florida, for instance, offers scholarships to special-education students that enable them to switch to another school (to either a public or private institution) that offers services more tailored to their child's needs. In a *Washington Times* article on the subject, Jay P. Greene points out that a McKay scholarship is good for the amount it would cost the state (via a public school) or a private school to educate the special-ed student—whichever is lower. Consequently, “the average amount of a McKay voucher in Florida is only \$7,206, far below the average per-pupil amount spent on a disabled student in the public schools.” The voucher benefits not only students and families, but also the taxpayers.

Surveys have shown public support for vouchers, particularly from ethnic minorities, who stand to gain the most from voucher programs. According to a 2007 survey by Education Next and Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance, 45 percent of the general population supports the policy. But when the different

racess are broken down, “68 percent of African Americans and 61 percent of Hispanics favor vouchers, compared to 40 percent of whites.” However, opposition among unions and policymakers is still strong enough that, at this point, only a few states have voucher provisions.

Tuition tax credits. Tuition or scholarship tax credits usually get more of a public hearing than vouchers. Several states allow individuals and corporations to make tax-deductible contributions to scholarship programs. A “personal-use” credit is also offered in some states, allowing families below a certain income to deduct a portion of their children's school expenses from their taxes.

Be open to alternative channels of quality education. Virtual schools, home schools, magnet schools—all have potential to provide student with an excellent education. Any of these options might be beneficial to students who travel, students with special education needs, children with parents in the military, etc. Students have different needs and learning styles, and they often benefit from different modes of instruction.

Overall, school choice strengthens public schools, not only by insert competition into the system, but by ensuring that the students in the public schools are getting their needs met and ensuring that the public school is equipped with the proper resources to educate all of their students. By supporting school choice and appropriate alternatives to public schooling, school boards strengthen the fabric of the whole community.

Other things you can do:

Shift the date of school board elections.

Many states hold school board elections separate from the general election, usually in the spring. This contributes to the notoriously low voter turnout—often under 10 percent—that has plagued school-board elections for years. Consequently, special interest groups who take an active interest in board elections—notably teachers unions—have a disproportionate impact on elections. Local school board candidates often have to struggle against a tide of disinterest. Some states have launched initiatives to shift the date of school board elections to coincide with the November general election, and some of these have succeeded.

Investigate the contracting out of non-instructional services.

Examining the budget of a school district or even a single school can be revealing. We've already seen how much money is expended per-pupil in public schools. But how much of that money, dollar-for-dollar, contributes directly to educating students? And what is the difference being used for? An examination of a typical budget shows that, in some areas, *less than half of the money spent in schools actually goes toward education*. The mission of our schools is to educate students—all of the money spent

in the system should contribute to this goal. The Mackinac Institute in Michigan has demonstrated in studies that those districts which privatize their school support services save anywhere from \$557 to \$814 per student. For larger districts in the country with over 100,000 students, that could translate into savings in the tens of millions a year.

Take an active approach to curriculum.

Curriculum is locally controlled in some states, giving the school board legal authority over what is used in the classroom. Take an active interest in what is used in your local classrooms. Dr. Karen Effrem of EdWatch, a Minnesota-based education advocacy group, points out that school board members can get so bogged down in dealing with the budget, for example, that they neglect other important matters, such as curriculum. So take an active interest in what local students are reading in their classes. Familiarize yourself with the materials used for different subjects. Are the students in your district being offered the most effective instruction available? Is the reading curriculum phonics-based, or does it use a whole-language approach? How is mathematics taught? Look at the data for your district and state: where do students need to improve? Where do the high and low scores fall?

Examine curriculum accordingly.

Give alternative teacher organizations access to your district.

There are a growing number of non-union associations offering teachers an alternative to union membership. The Association of American Educators, for instance, which has several state chapters, provides its members with insurance benefits, legal counsel, certification assistance, and workshops for professional development.

Members agree to a “Code of Ethics” that delineates expected professional conduct. School boards should be open to alternative teacher associations and allow them the same access to district communication channels that unions have.

Encourage online transparency for the school district. One of the problems faced in reforming the education system is simple good business practices and accounting for every dollar spent. Some school

districts don’t have line item budgets. That should be a priority for every school district, and once a good budget is reached, it should be posted online. The school district check register should also be posted online: the taxpayers who fund the system have a right to know how their dollars are being spent. School districts need to work towards greater transparency, and those two steps suggested above are good places to start.

Encourage involvement from the community. As you serve on the school board, talk to your neighbors, talk to parents, talk to local business owners. Encourage newspaper and television journalists to cover your meetings; be willing to grant interviews; keep them informed on board actions when appropriate. One of the primary obligations of any school board member should be to be the voice of the parents being served in the district.



Kick-starting your campaign

Preparing to serve

Many school board candidates, particularly in small districts, run unopposed and continue to be reelected without much competition. Campaigning successfully for a small district can cost as little as \$1,000 to \$2,000. Campaigning in a large district—defined by researchers as having upwards of 25,000 students—tend to be more political and can cost tens of thousands of dollars. If you are running in a larger district, find a campaign manager and begin raising funds as soon as possible.

- **Get to know your state's education laws.** Education laws vary from state to state. Some states are very open to alternative forms of schooling; some are not. Some states have charter school-friendly laws or merit-pay programs for teachers; some do not. How strong is your state's teachers union? What kind of collective bargaining laws does your state have? Research the regulations that govern the public school system in your state.
- **Find out your district's requirements for serving on the school board.** Find out your state's requirements for school board candidacy and research the particular authority that your state vests in local school boards. Are the local school board members elected at-large? Does the board have power to authorize charter schools? How much say do school board members seem to have in matters of curriculum?
- **Attend board meetings.** Get familiar with procedure, policies, key players, and the issues that are most important to your district. Which issues are most prominent? What committees has the board appointed? Volunteer, if there is a capacity to do so. Investigate serving on a school board advisory committee.
- **Get involved with local students and schools.** If you have children in a local school, you are probably already aware of some of the issues that arise. Become very active as a parent. Visit schools





and talk with teachers. Consider substitute teaching. Steve Hunt's road to the school board included working with troubled youth in the community, and later teaching abstinence-based sex education in the public schools. What are your areas or knowledge or expertise? Find ways to use your skills to interact with and benefit school-age children in your community.

- **Join community organizations.**

Steve Hunt, a former board member of the Fairfax County school board in Northern Virginia recommends joining as many community associations and organizations as you can, and attending as many meetings and events at those organizations as

possible. Personal contact and interaction is crucial. People have been known to vote for someone they know and of whom they have a positive impression, even if they do not agree with every single one of your views.

- **Get the word out.** It is no secret that many people are either uninformed or uninterested in the ins and outs of local politics. This can be particularly challenging for candidates running in an urban district, where other issues tend to overshadow local matters.

Read American Majority's Candidate and Activist Training Manuals for more tips on how to launch and run an effective campaign.

Conclusion

As elected officials, school board members form the only public body with the legitimate authority to operate a school district; neither teachers nor school employee unions have been granted authority by the electorate to undertake this responsibility,” write Kirk A. Johnson and Elizabeth H. Moser in *The Six Habits of Fiscally Responsible Public School Districts*, a report from the Mackinaw Center. When school board members are neck-deep in disputes with unions and other special interests, it is easy for them to forget the true authority they hold. Laws vary greatly from state to state: what a school board in one state can do, a school board in a neighboring state may be unable to do, either because it lacks authority or because local or state circumstances make it very difficult to act. Be sure to study the statutes governing the districts within your own state.

This resource is not exhaustive, but rather highlights a few areas where school boards have the right to exercise authority. True and lasting reform begins from the bottom up. Our country needs engaged, knowledgeable citizens who are willing to make a difference, and your local school board is a good place for you to start.

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Footnotes

¹ TK

² National Education Association.

Recommended Resources:

Alliance for School Choice
www.allianceforschoolchoice.org

Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice
www.friedmanfoundation.org

Thomas B. Fordham Institute
www.edexcellence.net

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
www.publiccharters.org

Hoover Institution and its quarterly *Education Next*
www.hoover.org
www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/

Connecting with American Majority

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LinkedIn® : <http://www.linkedin.com/in/AmericanMajority>

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To be a part of the American Majority Online Community and have access to more presentations, blogs, podcasts, and community forums with like-minded individuals follow these steps:

1. Go to AmericanMajority.org
2. Under “Member Login” section of the homepage, click “Register.”
3. Fill out the information and submit.
4. Go to your e-mail and click the confirm link.

NOTE: It is very important that you provide your real name when registering because we must know who you are to grant you access. After logging in under the “Community” section on the American Majority website, you will have access to all the content in the online community. If you have any questions, please email info@americanmajority.org.

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